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THE ART OF POETRY

Inaugural Lecture delivered before
the University of Oxford

5 June 1920

by

WILLIAM PATON KER

Fellow of All Souls; Professor of Poetry

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

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THE ART OF POETRY

I WISH I could say how deeply I feel what I owe to the generous and sanguine friends who have elected me to this most honourable Chair. It would be less difficult to find words for the danger of the task ; this is the Siege Perilous. But I will not attempt to say in full what I think and feel most sincerely with regard to the honour you have done me ; as for the hazards of the place, they must be manifest to every one who has spent any time at all in thinking of the Art of Poetry. But you will allow me to say as much as this, that I find the greatest encouragement and the best auspices in those who have held this Chair before me ; and I ask leave in this place to thank Mr. Bradley, Mr. Mackail, and the President of Magdalen for their good wishes.

DRUMMOND of Hawthornden, writing his sentiments about a new fashion in poetry which displeased him, begins with some old-fashioned sentences which may afford a text here ; in a letter addressed 'to his much-honoured friend M. A. J., Physician to the King'. His friend is the poet Arthur Johnston, 'who holds among the Latin poets of Scotland the next place to the

elegant Buchanan'. Drummond is writing to a man of the highest principles, as follows :

'It is more praiseworthy in noble and excellent things to know something, though little, than in mean and ignoble matters to have a perfect knowledge. Amongst all those rare ornaments of the mind of Man *Poesie* hath had a most eminent place and been in high esteem, not only at one time, and in one climate, but during all times and through those parts of the world where any ray of humanity and civility hath shined. So that she hath not unworthily deserved the name of the Mistress of human life, the height of eloquence, the quintessence of knowledge, the loud trumpet of Fame, the language of the Gods. There is not anything endureth longer : Homer's Troy hath outlived many Republics, and both the Roman and Grecian Monarchies ; she subsisteth by herself, and after one demeanour and continuance her beauty appeareth to all ages. In vain have some men of late (transformers of everything) consulted upon her reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and scholastical quiddities, denuding her of her own habits, and those ornaments with which she hath amused the world some thousand years. *Poesie* is not a thing that is in the finding and search, or which may be otherwise found out, being already condescended upon by all nations, and as it were established *iure gentium* amongst Greeks, Romans, Italians, French, Spaniards. Neither do I think that a good piece of *Poesie* which Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Petrarch,

Bartas, Ronsard, Boscan, Garcilasso (if they were alive and had that language) could not understand, and reach the sense of the writer.'

If they had that language! Here is the difficulty, so obvious that it escapes notice in many panegyrics of the Muses. In the other arts there is nothing like the curse of Babel; but the divine Idea of Poetry, abiding the same with itself in essence, shining with the same light, as Drummond sees it, in Homer and Virgil, Ronsard and Garcilaso de la Vega, is actually seen by very few votaries in each and all of those several lamps. The light of Poetry may be all over the world and belong to the whole human race, yet how little of it is really available, compared with the other arts! It is broken up among the various languages, and in such a way that not even time and study can always be trusted to find the true idea of Poetry. It is not merely that you are required to spend on the tongues the time that might be given to bear-baiting (as Sir Andrew discovered, ancestor of so many old gentlemen whose education has been neglected, so many seekers of culture), but even when you have mastered the grammar and dictionary you may find in the foreign poets insuperable difficulties of thought and sentiment. For poetic melody is not the same thing as music; it is much more deeply idiomatic and national. French is better understood in this country, more widely read than any foreign language; yet even the poets

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in this country, some of them, have spoken dismal things in disparagement of French poetry. It is no uncommon thing for ingenuous youth, lovers of poetry in England, to be made unhappy by the difficulty and strangeness, as it seems to them, of French verse. Mr. John Bailey and Mr. Eccles have helped them, and you remember how our friend, M. Émile Legouis, came here nine years ago and dealt faithfully with the English poets and critics who boasted of their deafness. They were refuted and confounded, their injustice exposed with logical wit, their grudging objections overborne simply by the advocate's voice, as he read the songs of Musset's *Fortunio* and Victor Hugo's *Fantine*.¹

But the difficulties remain, and English readers have to be taught that the French Alexandrine is neither 'our four-footed verse of the triple cadence' nor yet what the Northern languages made of it in the seventeenth century, High Dutch or Low Dutch, and Danish; and Drayton in *Polyolbion*:

Through the Dorsetian fields that lie in open
view

My progress I again must seriously pursue.

The peculiar idiom of the French tongue is diffused through all French poetry, and if this makes it hard for us, what becomes of the uni-

¹ *Défense de la poésie française, à l'usage des lecteurs anglais.*
(Constable, 1912.)

versal pattern which Drummond holds up as the same for all nations—‘like the Ancients, and conform to those rules which hath been agreed unto by all times’? What is the use of all times agreeing, if each nation hears nothing but its own tune?

On the other hand, Drummond’s worship of the Muses is not to be dismissed as fashionable rhetoric or conventional idealism. He knew what he was talking about, and he is thinking naturally of his own well-studied verse, his own share in the service of true poetry, along with Petrarch, Ronsard, Boscan, and Garcilaso. The names are not chosen at random, they are not there for ornament, like historical allusions of the popular preacher gabbling ‘Socrates, Buddha, and Emerson’, or like the formula of ‘Goethe, Kant, and Beethoven’, that used to pester us in the enlightened journalism of the War. When Drummond names Petrarch, Bartas, Ronsard, Boscan, and Garcilaso, he means the poets whom he knows and follows; more particularly in the Italian and Spanish names he means an art of poetry which he has made his own. For Drummond of Hawthornden belongs, like Spenser and Milton, to the great tradition of the Renaissance in modern poetry, the most comprehensive and vitally effective school of poetry in Christendom after the mediaeval fashion of Provence which it succeeds and continues. Drummond knows that he belongs to the great company of artists in

poetry who get their instruction from Italy, and he is right : his sonnets and madrigals are part of that Italian school which transformed the poetry of France and England, Portugal and Spain ; which gave to England the music of Spenser's *Epithalamion* and of *Lycidas*. The difficulties of the curse of Babel are not abolished ; but it is matter of historical fact that Italian poetry got over those obstacles in the sixteenth century ; in some places even earlier. The Italian measures and modes of thought are adopted in other countries. Garcilaso and Camoens are Italian poets writing Castilian and Portuguese. Their names are found together in that pretty scene near the end of *Don Quixote* ; the shepherdesses who took Don Quixote out of their silken fowling-nets were going to act eclogues of Garcilaso and Camoens. Drummond's madrigals, Milton's verses *On Time*, are pure Italian form. The poets of that tradition or school, or whatever it may be called, are not talking wildly, they are not hypocrites, if they speak as Drummond does of Poetry and say 'she subsisteth by herself, and after one demeanour and continuance her beauty appeareth to all ages'. At any rate they have proved in their own practice that they agree in different languages, drawing the same pattern, following the same rules of thought and melody.

With this reality in their mind they are justified to themselves in arguing that Poetry has not to be invented anew and is not to be trifled with.

Drummond in his respect for authority is quite different from the mere critics who preach up the Ancients. Any one can do that. We know their dramatic unities, and their receipts to make an epic poem. But the poet who belongs to a great tradition of art, transcending local barriers of language, is in a different case altogether. Even though he may not be, as Drummond was not himself, one of the great masters, and though the forms of his poetry be no more varied than those of Petrarch, still he has the reality of his own poems. The merely intellectual scheme of the critic turns to reality in the practical reason of the poet. His poetic life is larger than himself, and it is real life. Abstract and ideal in one way, no doubt, if you think of a bodiless Petrarchian form, identical in all the imitators of Petrarch. But the empty abstract Italian form of verse, the unbodied ghost of sonnets and *canzoni*, is itself real and a source of life :

Small at first, and weak and frail
Like the vapour of the vale :

but 'thoughts sprang where'er that step did fall', in the dance of the Italian syllables. The life of the poet is real in the poems he composes ; through them he knows where he is ; his praise of universal poetry is what he has made true for himself in the moments of his life, which he shares somehow with Petrarch and the other poets. Drummond has not had as good fortune

as they, though before we leave him let us remember that Charles Lamb has put Drummond among the best-loved names. Drummond is in the great tradition, and this is what he makes of it :

Rouse Memnon's mother from her Tython's bed,
That she thy carrier may with roses spread,
The nightingales thy coming each where sing,
Make an eternal spring,
Give life to this dark world which lieth dead.

And again :

This world is made a hell
Depriv'd of all that in it did excel ;
O Pan, Pan, winter is fallen in our May,
Turn'd is in night our day.

It is the tune of Petrarch, Garcilaso, and Camoens, of the prevalent Italian school. It is poetry, as the art of poetry was understood for two or three centuries, in Italy and wherever the Italian poets found an audience.

What is there in it ? When one looks into it to find the common element, to abstract the quintessence of the Italian school, is there anything more important than their favourite form of verse ? Namely, that harmony of their longer and shorter lines which Dante explained in his essay on the principles of Italian poetry—the harmony of our ten-syllable and six-syllable line, which in Italian is eleven and seven. Of which Dante says (with strange enthusiasm over a very simple metrical formula, you will think) :

‘The most noble verse, which is the hendecasyllable, if it be accompanied with the verse of seven, yet so as still to keep the preeminence, will be found exulting higher still in light and glory.’

Et licet hoc (i.e. endecasyllabum) quod dictum est celeberrimum carmen ut dignum est videatur omnium aliorum, si eptasyllabi aliqualem societatem assumat, dummodo principatum obtineat, clarius magisque sursum superbire videtur; sed hoc ulterius elucidandum remaneat.

Whatever else there may be in the Art of Poetry, there is this mysterious power of certain formulas, abstract relations of syllables; of all these frames of verse in modern poetry there is none of greater dignity and at the same time more widely spread, more generally understood than this measure of the Italian *Canzone*. A bodiless thing; in itself you would say as abstract as a geometrical diagram and of not much more worth for poetry. Yet read the great lyrical poems of Spenser and Milton, read the *Ode to a Nightingale*, *The Scholar Gipsy*, *Thyrsis*, and you will hear how the abstract harmony takes possession of the minds of poets, and compels their thought and imagination to move in the same measure. The noblest thoughts have gone to this tune:

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to the world nor in broad rumour lies.

Our own poet of *Thyrsis* makes a contrast between his world, the Cumnor hills, the Wytham flats, the upper river, and the Sicilian fields of the old pastoral poetry :

When Dorian shepherds sang to Proserpine.

Yet his Oxford verse is derived from Italy, from the poetry that began at the court of the Norman kings in Sicily : ‘ Flowers first open’d on Sicilian air ’.

In Drummond’s praise of poetry we can detect two modes of thought, equally true but not equally effective. One is regard for the Ancients, which we can all share as readers of poetry. The other mode is adherence to a certain noble tradition of verse which is a living influence much nearer to the mind of the artist. Looking at Homer and Virgil, he is in a theatre along with innumerable other spectators. But at the sound of Petrarch’s verse, he leaves the benches and takes his place in the orchestra. The infinite riches of Homer and Virgil he appreciates as a man of taste and a scholar ; but the simple Italian metrical formula — 11 : 7 — makes a poet of him.

I have long thought of writing a book on the measures of modern poetry, from about the year 1100, when it begins in Provence. Whether it would do for lectures, I am not sure. It might possibly be useful if not entertaining. You will allow me a quotation, which I hope is not impertinent ; a passage from the life of Dr. William

Crowe, of New College, who was Public Orator a hundred years ago; a poet of whom Wordsworth thought well, and the author of a treatise on versification. 'Writing to Rogers in February, 1827, to ask him to negotiate with Murray for the issue of a new edition of his poems, in which he wished to include a treatise on English versification, Crowe says :

'If he is willing to undertake the publishing I will immediately furnish more particulars and also submit the copy to your inspection. If the part on versification could be out before the middle of April it would find a present sale in Oxford, for this reason: there are above four score young poets who start every year for the English prize, and as I am one of the five judges to decide it they would (many of them) buy a copy to know my doctrine on the subject. The compositions are delivered in about the beginning of May.'¹

My treatise will, I think, bring out some curious things, not generally known, of the same sort as the well ascertained and widespread influence of the Italian *Canzone* on the solemn odes of many languages. The same magical life of the spirit of verse is found everywhere. The best in this kind are echoes, and they travel over prodigious distances. My story will begin with the Venerable Bede, the first Englishman to write on prosody. Ages before the English took to the measures of modern verse Bede explained in Latin how it

¹ Clayden, *Rogers and his Contemporaries*, ii. 29.

would be done. He shows the difference between learned and popular, metrical and rhythmical verse ; how without respect for quantity the measure of strict verse may be imitated, and how the rustic licence of popular poets may be used by artists in poetry. He gives the rule (e. g.) of the trochaic tetrameter ; trochaic and tetrameter still, he reckons it, even when the rules of metrical quantity are neglected :

Apparebit repentina dies magna Domini.

A thousand years later the tune of it takes the mind of Dr. Johnson, and he sings :

Long-expected one and twenty,
 Ling'ring year, at length is flown :
 Pride and pleasure, pomp and plenty,
 Great *Sir John*, are now your own.
 Loosen'd from the minor's tether,
 Free to mortgage or to sell,
 Wild as wind and light as feather,
 Bid the sons of thrift farewell.

It appears first in modern poetry in William of Poitiers. His authorship of Burns's favourite stanza is well known. He also uses this, the verse of a *Toccata of Galuppi*, combined with the verse of *Love among the Ruins*.

When Captain Scott Moncrieff the other day translated the *Song of Roland* in the verse of the original, he found the measure recognized as that of the old Scottish version of the 124th Psalm :

Now Israel may say and that truly
 If that the LORD had not our cause maintained.

The reason is that the Scottish poet was translating from the French Psalter of Marot and Beza; he wanted the French tune for his congregation of 'Gude and godlie ballads', and of course he had to keep the measure with the sharp pause at the fourth syllable, just as in *Roland*:

Halt sunt li pui e tenebrus e grant
and

En Rencesvals mult grant est la dultur.

For a thousand years in Christendom the Art of Poetry has lived on the old forms of rhythmical verse, derived, some of them obviously, others otherwise, from the metres of Greek and Latin, with the help of musical tunes.

Now this seems to bring out a considerable difference between the art of poetry and the other arts, at any rate in modern times. We talk of schools of poetry; but the beginners in poetry do not work through their apprenticeship in schools of art and offices like students of painting, music, and architecture. They are not taught; they have much to learn, but they learn it in their own way; the rudiments are easily acquired. Even a momentous discovery like that of which Dante speaks, the Italian harmony, as I have called it, is a trivial thing in appearance; it has been the life of very glorious poems, but there is nothing in it that needs to be explained to a working poet.

Is it true, or not, that the great triumphs of poetical art often come suddenly? Art like that of Pindar would seem to be impossible without

long preparation ; but the Drama in Athens, England, and Spain, does it not seem to come very suddenly by its own, and attain its full proportions almost at once when once it has begun ? The speed of the victory in England has been rather obscured for the popular mind through the conspiracy of Shakespeare's friends and admirers to praise him in the wrong way for native uncorrected genius, not at all for art. Yet is there anything more amazing in Shakespeare's life than his security in command of theatrical form ? One of the first things he does, when he has a little leisure, is to invent the comedy of idle good manners in *Love's Labour's Lost*; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he raises and completes the finest and most varied structure of poetical comedy : where did he learn it all ? There had been nothing on earth like it ; what had Plautus or Terence to contribute to that entertainment of Theseus and Hippolyta ? Did Shakespeare get anything from classical comedy except the *Errors* and that fardel of baby things which proves the parentage of Perdita ? That eternal bag of evidences—*πηρίδιον γνωρισμάτων*—it was a disappointment lately to observe that Menander could not leave it behind him when he was brought up from underground in Egypt. Shakespeare and Molière (in *Scapin*) have no scruples about the bundle of tokens at the end of the play, identifying the female infant. Yet to wait centuries for Menander in the original Greek, and then to find him dwelling with zest

on this old fardel—it did not add to the gaiety of nations. Shakespeare did not need this misadventure of Menander to bring out the contrast. Where did he learn his incomparable art?

On the other hand, there may be convention and long tradition leading to a sudden stroke of genius. Two of the most original of English poets, Chaucer and Burns, are the most indebted to their poetical ancestors. Burns has been injured in the same way as Shakespeare, by the wrong sort of admiration. Unlike Shakespeare, he began this himself, with the voluntary humility of his Edinburgh dedication to the Caledonian Hunt: ‘I tuned my wild artless notes as she inspired’. ‘She’ is ‘the Poetic Genius of my country’. But the Muse of Scotland had established for Burns a convention and tradition full of art; his book is the result of two or three generations of poetical schooling, and ‘wild artless notes’ are as unlike the perfect style of Burns as the sentiment of his preface generally is unlike the ironical vision of the *Holy Fair*.

The Art of Poetry is much more free than the other arts, in the sense that the right men do not need such steady training. Perhaps it is easier for the right men to work miracles, such as Burns did, in bringing the appearance of novelty and freshness out of old fashions. Also the essence of poetry is such that often much smaller things, comparatively, tell for success than in painting or music. Eight lines beginning ‘A slumber did

my spirit seal ' may be larger in imagination than earth's diurnal course. Eight lines lately addressed to a mercenary army were enough to tell how the sum of things was saved :

Their shoulders held the sky suspended,
They stood, and earth's foundations stay.

Often single lines and phrases seem to have the value of whole poems. In the old English song ' Bitwene Mershe and Averill when spray ginneth to springe ' the opening words are everything ; though one is glad to have more. Herrick has put the whole meaning of the pilgrim's progress into two lines of his *Noble Numbers* :

I kenn my home, and it affords some ease
To see far off the smoaking villages.

Quoniam advena ego sum et peregrinus, sicut omnes patres mei. It is the English landscape too, as you come down the hill at the end of the day.

Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, is praised for his descriptions, particularly the Summer and Winter in two of his prologues. He is not often quoted for his great discovery in a line or two of the thirteenth prologue of *Eneados*, where he tells how he watched the midsummer midnight in the North, and finds not only the right word for what he sees, but the right word for his own poetry :

Yondir down dwinis the evin sky away,
And up springis the bricht dawning of day
Intill ane uthir place nocht fer in sunder
Quhilk to behald was plesance and half wonder.

He sees a new thing in the life of the world—no poet that I know of (except Homer) had thought of it before—and in naming it he gives the interpretation also, the spirit of poetry : plesance, and half wonder.

This sort of miracle, this sudden glory, is an escape from the fashion of the time, and the fashions of poetry, the successive schools are such that escapes are not so difficult as in the other arts. The history of poetry must be the history of schools and fashions. But the progress of poesy does not mean simply the refutation of old schools by new fashions. The poets have sometimes thought so ; like Keats in *Hyperion*, possibly ; like Dante when he speaks of the older lyric poetry as distained by comparison with the sweet new style, *dolce stil nuovo*, of his own masters and fellows. But apart from the grace that you may find in the older fashion as a whole, taking it as an antiquarian curiosity, there is the chance, the certainty, that here and there among the old songs you will come upon something new, independent, a miracle. In the old lyric poetry of Provence, which has been made a byword for conventionality and monotonous repetition, there are poems that seem to start afresh, worth dwelling on and remembering. This is true also of the other similar school of the German minnesingers, which has been equally maligned.

Mnemosyne, Mother of the Muses, has allowed many things to pass into oblivion. But the

Memory of the World in poetry keeps alive everything that is kept at all, and in such a way that at any time it may turn to something new. The simplest measures of verse, the best known stories, you can never be sure that they are out of date. The stories of the Greek mythology have long ago been indexed. I have an old Dutch Ovid in prose, the *Metamorphosis* translated 'for the behoof of all noble spirits and artists, such as rhetoricians, painters, engravers, goldsmiths, &c.' Nothing could be more business like : a handy book of suitable subjects then ; now long abandoned, you would say, in the march of intellect. Yet we know how the old tragic legend of Procne and Philomela turned into the *Itylus* of *Poems and Ballads* :

O sweet stray sister, O shifting swallow
 The heart's division divideth us ;
 Thy heart is light as leaf of a tree,
 But mine goes forth among seagulfs hollow
 To the place of the slaying of Itylus,
 The feast of Daulis, the Thracian sea.

There is no need for me to say more of this :
Who hath remembered, who hath forgotten ?
 For the present, I have spoken long enough.

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